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ABSTRACT

A rural school administrator functions in many roles including disciplinarian, extracurricular supervisor, community liaison, curriculum leader, interpreter of state department regulations and fiscal director. New technologies in education have given even more roles to the administrator. The need to keep abreast of the plethora of educational research and its potential application to the local school encounters the obstacles of insufficient time and inexperience with educational research. Several ways to meet the challenge of new research and technologies exist, each with advantages and disadvantages to the rural school district. The most cost effective and versatile would be hiring a rural education consultant. Major areas on which the education consultant can usefully focus include: (1) instruction; (2) educational technology; (3) polity development; (4) curriculum improvement; (5) research and development; (6) personnel training and professional development; (7) grant development; (8) administration assistance; (9) program evaluation; and (10) communication. The consultant should possess the following qualifying characteristics: (1) a generalist orientation; (2) a background not necessarily in education; (3) a problem-solving orientation; (4) knowledge of current education research and program information; (5) access to university and/or college departments; (6) knowledge of research methodologies; (7) knowledge of educational technology; (8) written and oral communication skills; (9) general management skills; (10) nonauthoritative style; and (11) a clear focus on educational improvement. The advantages of the rural educational consultant model, procedures for recruiting the consultant, and district attributes conductive to use of the model are also discussed, and recommendations for adopting the consultant model are offered. (ALL)

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INITIATING THE ROLE OF THE EDUCATIONAL CONSULTANT IN THE RURAL SCHOOL

A paper commissioned

by

Mid-Continent Regional
Education Laboratory

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INITIATING THE ROLE OF THE EDUCATIONAL CONSULTANT IN THE RURAL SCHOOL

I. PROBLEM DEFINITION

As research in education and advanced educational technologies continue to develop into the 1990's, rural schools are increasingly faced with a multitude of demands. Rural school administrators have long been saddled with roles as disciplinarian, extracurricular supervisor, community liaison, curriculum leader, interpreter of state department regulations, and fiscal director. In the last half of this decade, even more roles have been thrust upon the rural school administrator. The amount of material discussing current technology is overwhelming. Administrators must make purchasing decisions about computer hardware and software, satellite receiving systems, videodisc equipment, RGB monitors, videocassette recorders, etc., often with little but the respective salespersons upon which to rely for information. Furthermore, integration of technology into the curriculum is quite another matter, and often haphazardly implemented, resulting in little enhanced educational productivity.

The traditional roles of superintendent and principal become much more idiosyncratic in the rural school. Whereas a superintendent of a large or urban district often becomes the figurehead CEO responsible only for board of education liaison and public image, the small rural school superintendent may share or divide duties with the principal, even filling in for the building level principal. Depending upon administrative style and comfort level with various areas of responsibility, the rural superintendent may indeed do everything from speaking at the Chamber of Commerce luncheon, to monitoring an instruction by satellite class, to driving the team bus to a ball-game-- all in the course of a single day. Yet there is

virtually no preparation-- academic or otherwise--for the role assumed by many rural school administrators. The rapid onset of educational technology has left comfortable implementation to only the most progressive and/or technologically sophisticated.

The multitude of regulations associated with state and federal programs--for the gifted, the remediated, the disadvantaged, the special needs, the at-risk, or the alcohol- or drug-dependent--has forced the need for someone, most usually the superintendent and/or principal, to become a self-taught "local expert" on each.

With the implementation of performance-based teacher evaluations, career ladder programs, and professional development committees come additional responsibilities for the rural school administrator, complete with unique procedures, regulations, progress reports, and financial audits. While these programs may be excellent in intent, rarely do already overburdened administrators have enough time to adequately address their implementation and maintenance.

As funding, both local and state, continues to lag behind the real dollar needs of most rural districts, any sources of outside funding are often looked upon as the only means of initiating new or innovative programs. The three characteristics, however, most often lacking among rural school administrators--time, expertise, and a knowledgeable support base or network--conspire against the rural school in the pursuit of outside grant funds. That is not to say, however, that their urban counterpart is any better prepared; it is simply not necessary for the urban superintendent to have anywhere near the breadth of expertise required of the rural administrator.

If the rural administrator is determined enough to initiate a grant application and lucky enough to succeed in the competition for funds, there remains the time and knowledge requirements associated with program implementation, evaluation design, data gathering and documentation, and report generation. Without a background in social science research and evaluation, school administrators are often ill-equipped to perform these tasks. Needless to say, rural schools are notoriously in the minority among grant applicants and in even a smaller minority among grant recipients. The essential, or at least immediate, issues of insurance negotiation, parking lot pavement, boiler repair, and PTO complaints

seemingly overshadow the need for academic leadership.

Often last on the list of rural school administrators is the need to keep abreast of the plethora of educational research and its potential application to the local school. The bulk of "school improvement" literature at least assumes there is a widespread mandate for school improvement at the local level, but this entire body of knowledge lies out of reach of the typical rural administrator. Not only is the administrative orientation of an entire generation of administrators more inclined toward maintaining the status quo, but the obstacles of insufficient time and inexperience with educational research are often barriers which the rural administrator cannot overcome.

Take a country school, add to it the assorted speech, behavior disorder, educable mentally retarded, learning disability, and remedial programs, plus gifted education, latchkey programs, developmental preschools, breakfast and lunch programs, and complete sports, art, and music programs for the community, and it is a wonder small school administrators can an least give lip service to the correlates of effective schools research.

II. DELIVERY METHODS

A rural district has several options in meeting these diverse needs. Each has distinct advantages and disadvantages to the rural school, especially as the bureaucratic structure of large urban schools are paralleled.

• Hiring an Assistant Superintendent

The most obvious and widespread reaction to an overburdened superintendency is to divide responsibilities with an assistant superintendent. If funds allow--and size dictates--the hiring of one or more assistants can effectively relieve the superintendent from direct involvement with education; as the size of the educational bureaucracy increases so does the insulation of the superintendent from instruction and curriculum. While the assignment of a single specific duty is perhaps appropriate in a large district setting--even though it could be argued that the extent of separation of duties may make the urban student as obsolete as Ford's assembly line product--there is no evidence to suggest that the proliferation of the urban school model to the rural school is appropriate. Division of duties along clearly defined lines, e.g., finance vs. curriculum vs. transportation, etc., can result in a lost sense of organizational cohesiveness, yet another characteristic of bureaucracies, educational and otherwise.

To a rural district, the costs of adding administrative personnel can be prohibitive in relation to the number of students enrolled. However, unlike the country school of the past, the number of students in a modern rural district has virtually no bearing on the type of ancillary programs offered, the curricular offerings mandated, or the number or extent of duties required of an administrator.

While the qualifications of assistant superintendents are carefully controlled at the state level, those qualifications may have little to do with the requirements of the job in a rural school. Training in school finance or collective bargaining does not prepare one to direct utilization of educational technology or write successful grant applications.

- **Hiring an Assistant Principal**

Similarly, the hiring of a traditional assistant principal, most often for the purpose of relieving the principal of his/her duties as disciplinarian, does not always equate to redirection of the principal toward academic leadership or long-range planning. In the rural school, the appointment of an assistant principal does, however, usually mean the obligatory attendance at sports events can be, at least, shared. This is not a trivial consideration, given the nearly nightly obligations for up to half of each academic year.

- **Hiring a Temporary Specialist**

In the business world, which education seems to mimic a decade out of sinc, special needs are usually addressed by hiring, on a temporary basis, the expertise to achieve the goal at hand. In education, it has become fashionable to "hire" the outside specialist to conduct a faculty inservice training program, analyze a transportation problem, or write a grant. While the immediate goal may be achieved, it is usually at a pay scale that also mimics the business world, but far beyond the "reasonableness standard" of the local community. Furthermore the temporary hiring of an outside "specialist" neither builds on the unique situation of the district nor lays the foundation for meeting the next need that arises. A temporary expert brought into the district cannot possess any comprehensive knowledge of the district nor can he/she provide any continuity or address auxiliary needs as they arise. The utility of such an expert seems to be limited to the one-time fulfillment of a specific goal.

• Adding an Area-Specific Specialist to the Staff

To a district which sees a specific area in which there exists little or no local expertise, a rational approach is the hiring of an area- specific specialist. For example, a district whose administration and faculty is, for the most part, technologically illiterate may see the need to hire a "Computer Specialist" as a way to logically gain assistance in the purchase and implementation of computer technology. Two problems often encountered, however, are that: (1) the persons most knowledgeable in such fields are typically not educators, therefore limited by most state departments' regulations to non- teaching roles; and (2) their orientation is typically that of "technician", fine for setting disk drive speed or debugging a PASCAL program, but lacking any clue as to the application of technology to education. Again, the problem of hiring area-specific expertise in a district with multiple areas of need depends on the financial capability for hiring multiple "experts".

• Identification of a Local Expert

Districts with the foresight or luck to have hired a teacher, counselor, or administrator with some expertise in a needed area of technology or curriculum development are more apt to be able to cope without the addition of extra personnel. The potential availability of the faculty member as well as their comprehensive knowledge of the district are certainly assets, but the nature of faculty relationships are usually such that any assistance given must first be requested and/or mediated through the administration, leaving the scope of the assistance as only immediate problem-solving. Other limitations usually exist both with the time available, (i.e. teachers with an already full class load) and with the amount of expertise the staff member possesses, (i.e., a little knowledge only goes a little way).

• Hiring a Part-time Rural Education Consultant

An alternative to the above options for dealing with rural district needs is the hiring of a part-time Rural Education Consultant. As used herein, the term Rural Education Consultant refers to the contracted hiring of a part-time person to assist in meeting the technological and other needs confronting the small rural school. While a single immediate goal may be the impetus for hiring such a consultant, the agenda quickly evolves into one of general problem-solving and program development, allowing the district a greater degree of latitude in going about the business of school improvement.

Central to the notion of hiring such a consultant is the--at least covert--interest in school improvement. There must be an administrative interest is seeing a problem solved, a new program implemented, or long-range planning accomplished. In addition the administrator must see the advantage to bringing in outside expertise to accomplish these goals and there must be the conscious realization that he/she cannot do it alone.

Both in those states with well-defined intermediate units and in those lacking any source of technical support to local districts, the concept of the Rural School Consultant is a viable delivery method.

Many options occur with respect to hiring arrangements, scope of duties, etc., however the following sections will delineate the major options and recommendations.

III. THE RURAL SCHOOL CONSULTANT--METHOD OF OPERATION

Most schools, rural or urban, do not possess a conscious model for school improvement, nor is there usually followed a systematic approach to need identification linked to programmatic solution, implementation and evaluation. The diagram on the following page attempts to delineate the process most useful in assisting a district go about the business of school improvement.

A. Acknowledgement of a Belief System

The improvement model is a way of beginning to systematically identify existing problems or concerns and proceeding to remedy those needs or exploit the opportunities. Central to this process is an acknowledgement of the belief structure in which the district operates--both of the faculty and administrators and of the community in which the school is located. Without taking the time to learn or understand the local belief system, the naked adoption of programs has no better than a random chance of success. It would make little sense, for instance, to advocate abolition of a vocational program in a community simply because it was thought to be obsolete in the larger societal context. The belief--whether based in reality or perception--that the vocational training of the community's youth was being disregarded could prove fatal to school-community relations.

The acknowledgement of a belief system--the local reality, if you will--is key to maximizing the benefit and success of any educational input.

B. Defining Opportunities and Identifying Needs: The Setting of Goals

It has long been the *modus operandi* of many school districts to either ignore the vast number of currently popular programs and methods or blindly adopt them without anything more than a cursory acknowledgement of need. The conscious act of goal setting both at

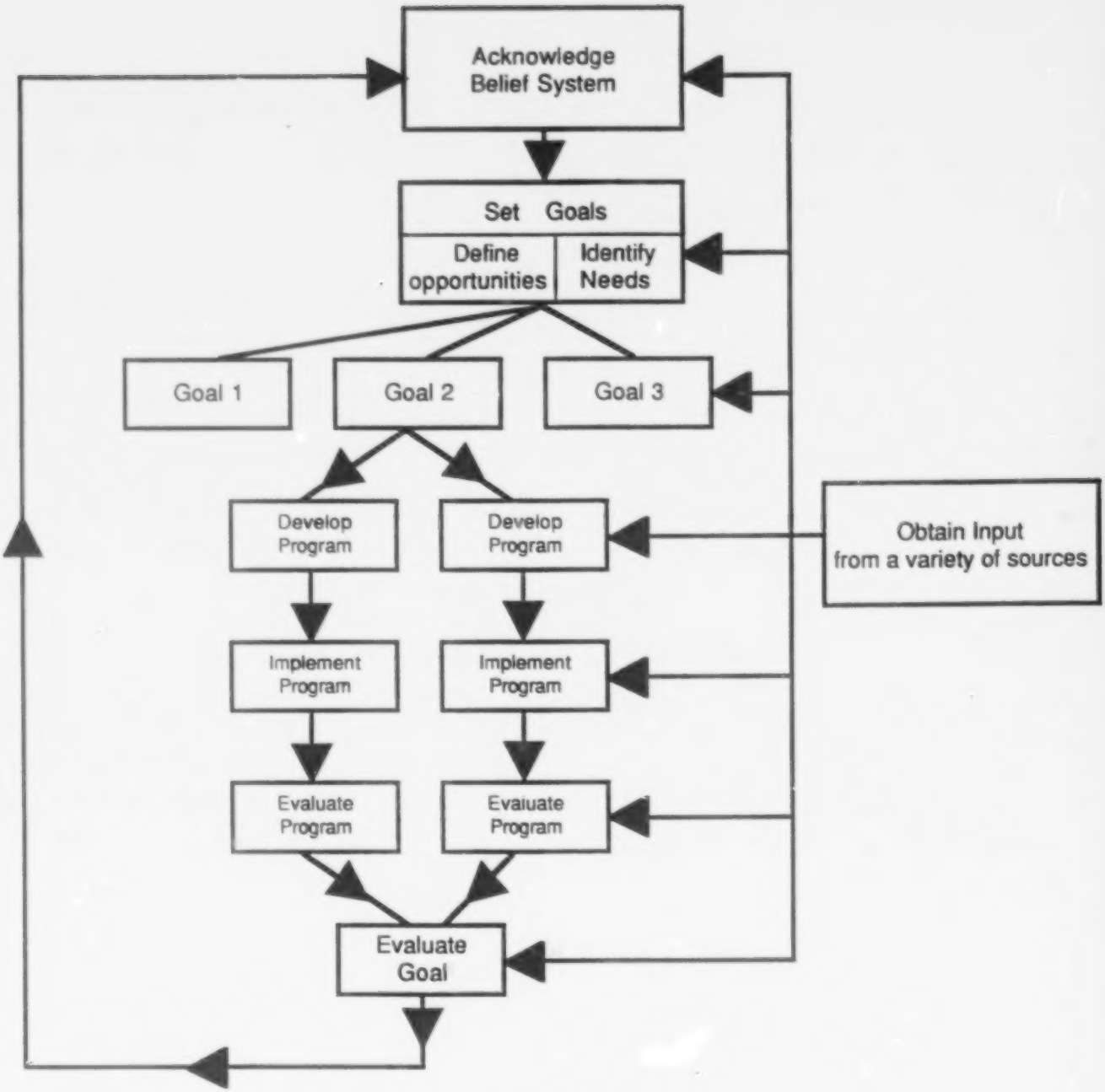

Diagram I

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PROCESSS

This is the general development model which a district can utilize in the process of educational improvement.

the district and building level creates the framework for deciding priorities and assigning appropriate budgets. Goals, however, may have two very distinct origins. Parallel to the definition of opportunities is the related identification of need. While a district may set a long-term goal out of a sense of the opportunity to improve education, it is equally feasible to establish a goal based on an identified need. The difference between the two forms of goal setting is based largely on the extent to which the district is "on top of things". A district which is constantly mending fences and addressing problems may not be able to look past the problem-fixing stage to the development of long-term goals. On the other hand, a district of sufficient size to have a bureaucraticly separated administration may spend its time in so- called long-range planning without realizing there are immediate problems requiring attention.

In reality, the preferred path is probably a healthy mixture of the two approaches--a process to define goals based on opportunity to improve education and the concurrent identification of district needs based on a rigorous and continuous assessment procedure.

C. Program Development

Obviously goals cannot be achieved by simply declaring that they will be met; it is most often necessary to develop a program or effort to insure goal attainment. For instance, if a district goal was to reduce the number of students reading below grade-level, it would not be a practical solution to simply mandate that teachers make sure all students are reading at grade-level. Although a simplistic example, it is amazing to see the inability of many districts to adequately address such problems. In order to realize goal attainment, specific programs and activities must be implemented.

Program development can take several different forms: (1) Program adoption infers the implementation of a "canned" program, i.e., one already developed, in the local school; (2) Program adaptation refers to the modification of a program existing elsewhere to the local situation; and (3) Program development, in the true sense, involves the generation of unique program components as a means of solving a local problem.

The key element brought to this process by the Rural Education Consultant is the identification of pertinent outside resources, both people and material, from which the knowledge base--and belief system--can continue to grow. Input from a variety of sources, be they college or university departments, ERIC data bases, library research, national experts, Regional Educational Laboratories, or other districts, is essential to gaining new perspectives and new ideas for implementing programmatic solutions. The stagnation of any organization is likely to occur without the insurgence of new ideas and perspectives. What the Rural Education Consultant can bring to the local district is not only, his/her own ideas but ideas from a variety of sources to which local administrators or faculty have no real access.

This "access to the outside world" may be the very thing which can make small rural districts begin to capitalize on their unique ability to make things happen quickly. With size as no impairment to implementation, small districts can, with some assistance, identify the problems or opportunities, develop the solutions or efforts. and implement the programs in the amount of time it would take a large district to form a committee.

D. Program Implementation

Program implementation refers to the process by which well-defined program components are put into operation. While program development infers the adoption, adaptation, or initiation of an effort, the actual implementation of the program may require an equal amount of outside assistance. Faculty training, facility remodeling, materials/equipment acquisition, etc. may be beyond the ability or time constraints of local administrators or faculty. If someone, such as an Education Consultant, is available to oversee the implementation of a program through the initial stages, the program has a much better chance of success. With someone to turn to as problems arise or indecision eminates, a teacher or administrator is much more likely to approach the program with a positive outlook.

This stage of program implementation, while necessarily involving teaching faculty, should never be the point at which faculty are first involved. The imposition of a program into a classroom, without the prior involvement of faculty in the goal definition and program development stages, will rarely lead to success. Such is the case in many large districts having "imposed" instructional management on its teachers without first involving them in the process of identifying needs and defining goals.

Another word of caution is equally in order. When the Education Consultant either assumes the role of program provider or that role is thrust upon the Consultant by the local district, the long-term success of the program is also jeopardized. Given the opportunity to do so, most teachers would just as soon have someone else responsible for carrying out new program initiatives. But without local teachers assuming responsibility for carrying out the program, it is likely that the program will never be fully internalized into the district, i.e., it will always be someone else's program and will likely last only as long as the provider lasts.

E. Program and Goal Evaluation

Another way of looking at this model for school improvement is as a continuous loop during which evaluation efforts, both of programs and of goals lead to a refined belief system and thereby to the "redefinition" of programs and goals. To many small districts operating without the assistance of someone in the role of Education Consultant, the evaluation of programs and/or goals seems an unnecessary burden. It is much easier and generally acceptable within education to operate on the basis of "conventional wisdom", that is to weigh your inclinations along with your selective perceptions and come up with a decision to stop, continue, or change what is being done. The use of empirical evaluation techniques in weighing goal or program appropriateness and success, however, is a far better method of insuring that the process of "school improvement" is on-task. Without empirical observation, data collection, and analysis, important programmatic decisions are left to intuition.

Program evaluation is critical--no so much because it is often mandated with the utilization of outside funds--but because it is the only way, apart from general perceptions, of identifying the value of the program in meeting the goals defined. The notion that a program will remain simply because it is now institutionalized, i.e., built into the schedule, is not a notion conducive to true school improvement. Nevertheless, the data must be convincing, the length of program operation must have been sufficient, and the evaluation methods must have been rigorous enough to end a program already implemented. Alternatively, a good evaluation procedure most typically dictates changes or improvements in the method of operation over time rather than it's mere existence or demolition.

The longitudinal evaluation of school goals and the collection of data necessary for that evaluation is indeed an area in which the typical administrator feels ill-prepared. To be able to ascertain, through collective faculty, administrator, and board involvement, the outcome-based goals which the district wishes to pursue and to continually evaluate those goals--and the programs related to goal attainment--may be considered the standard against which schools themselves should be measured.

Unlike the level of knowledge possessed by the science teacher, for instance, who may understand basic science research procedures, the elements of social science research (which are most pertinent to evaluation of educational programs) involve the development of evaluation instruments which can measure not only "hard data", e.g., achievement test scores, reduction in dropout rates, etc., but also attitude change, comfort levels, rates of adoption, etc.

The incorporation of an Education Consultant to this evaluation process not only lends expertise to the process but also allows for the informal education of faculty and administrators in social science research procedures. Indeed the insight offered by something as simple as understanding the stages of adoption/diffusion--awareness, information gathering, evaluation, trial, and adoption--can open new avenues in teacher understanding.

This model for school improvement is not new or unique, but its conscious adoption along with the access of the district to an outside impetus--the Rural Education Consultant--

seems to bring a much more focused and fruitful educational environment in which the business of school improvement is paramount.

F. Program Identification

While the above model for school improvement may be rigorously adhered to, the model itself does not ensure the development of effective (or even well thought out) programmatic efforts. In the diagram on the following page are represented eight district "types" based on common philosophical underpinnings as they apply to educational change. Associated with each philosophy are the common goals sought, the level of knowledge required, and the likely program types eminating from the goals as defined. (See Table I)

The common district typologies as defined by their respective philosophies are included here as indicators of how many districts react to the issue of change as implied by educational improvement or reform. Pure typologies do not occur as frequently as combinations of philosophies within a district. Where strong administrators basically dictate the extent, direction and type of change promoted, however, districts are more likely to fall within pure types.

The potential impact of an Education Consultant on each of the eight typologies should be noted. Whereas Types 1, 2a, and 3 would have little use for the services of a consultant, usage would tend to increase with each succeeding type. Type 8, therefore, while in most need for the services of an Education Consultant could also most likely benefit most from it.

The programs generated from each district philosophy have varying relationships to district needs and goals. Again, Type 8 districts are more likely to closely link programmatic efforts to local needs while carefully evaluating inputs and outcomes. Without this logical progression from acknowledgement of belief system, to goal setting, to program development, implementation, and evaluation, it is unlikely that a wholistic approach to school improvement can exist.

TABLE I: COMMON TYPOLOGIES OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS WITH RESPECT TO IMPLEMENTING CHANGE

PHILOSOPHY	COMMON GOALS	SPECIAL KNOWLEDGE BASE REQUIRED	COMMON PROGRAMS
1. Don't Make Waves!	Maintain status quo at all cost	None	Only those which are mandated
2. There's No Money Anyway!	a) No reason to identify needs--can't do anything about it anyway. *or alternatively...* b) Anything to bring in money!	a) None b) Some grant writing experience helpful	a) Only those which are mandated b) Whatever will bring in extra funds
3. Schools need to return to the past!	Hire teachers concerned only with teaching!	Knowledge base ignores current research and focuses on an idealistic view of past educational techniques	Nothing outside basic education; programs focus on the "normal" child with little tolerance for children or programs outside the norm
4. Jump on the Bandwagon!	Needs not identified	Reliance on state department or other mass-produced information; need for knowledge can be extensive but usually lacks evaluation or systematic implementation	Programs adopted are not related to identified local needs but to those that are popular in education circles
5. Acclaim Seeking!	Needs not systematically identified other than need for recognition	Special knowledge related to program implementation only; most usually equipment oriented; reliance on commercial vendors for information	Only programs with high visibility; programs involving technological innovations are typical
6. Pet Project	Need may or may not be identified; goal linked to specific area of administrator interest	Expertise beyond scope of administrator knowledge sought from private vendors, trade magazines, popular literature, etc.	Programs compatible with the special interest areas of the adminstrator
7. Change for the Sake of Change	Reliance on outside identification of the general problems in education today	Dependent on outside change agents, e.g., National Diffusion Network, Madeline Hunter, etc.	Programs not linked to local needs, but thought to be beneficial to education in general
8. Educational Improvement is a Continuing Process	Goals are based on systematic identification of local need	Extensive and result-oriented knowledge base required; level of expertise needed is currently unavailable or unidentified	Programs based on identification of local needs; program evaluation is integral part of process and used to verify or modify program operation.

IV. SCOPE OF CONSULTANT ACTIVITIES

While a Rural Education Consultant may be initially hired for a specific purpose, i.e., to implement an instructional management system or to write grant applications, there is little which falls outside the bailiwick of the renaissance person adequately prepared for the role of Education Consultant. Below are listed the major areas in which schools most often can utilize assistance and on which the Education Consultant can focus:

• Instruction

Rural school teachers in particular may have little contact with their peers outside the local district and consequently may only be exposed to different instructional techniques through magazines or a once-a-year workshop.

Obvious areas in which the Education Consultant may be asked to instruct faculty, provide workshops, or develop programs are:instructional management, mastery learning, cooperative learning, and whole language.

• Educational Technology

A primary need of rural districts today is access to reliable information on educational technology both with respect to purchasing and usage. Computers, videodiscs, educational television, distance learning (audiographics, instruction by satellite, interactive TV), telecommunications, etc. are all areas in which most administrators and faculty have little, if any, expertise. Afforded by such ignorance, the entrepreneurial opportunity taken advantage of by many brokering associations and commercial salespersons is extensive. For most districts there is no alternative. The general technological ignorance even on the part of state departments of education have opened the door to, in some cases, statewide pushes toward widespread local district purchase of expensive equipment with little attention to need assessment, equipment utilization, or program integration. The ability to

access an Education Consultant could certainly assist in alleviating the powerlessness felt by many districts in this technological age.

With legislative backing or initiative many states have politically strong-armed schools into mass adoption of technologies which may have varying applications to given situations. Case in point--the blanketing of satellite dishes across all districts in any given state has little merit from the standpoint of individual district need. With the assistance of knowledgeable Education Consultants, districts may regain an element of control in issues of technology acquisition and utilization.

• Policy Development

Rural districts with limited faculty size are most often reticent to establish teacher committee after teacher committee as the source of faculty input, when such multi-committee assignments are burdensome to faculty. An area which often falls back on the administrator, whether because of authoritarian style or the acknowledgement that the faculty cannot tolerate yet another committee, is that of policy development. Discipline, career ladder, performance based evaluation, and professional ethics are some of the policy development areas in which an Education Consultant may assist. By bringing outside expertise and/or access to information, the Consultant may shed new light or share new perspectives on age-old problems.

• Curriculum Improvement

Paralleling the general laxness of many districts in utilizing any form of program evaluation is the similar lack of initiative in developing a dynamic method of curriculum improvement. Often left with a five-year-old "scope and sequence" in the principal's bottom drawer or lesson plans left over from two teachers ago, the process of curriculum improvement is thought to have been accomplished. The Rural Education Consultant can bring new life and another set of hands to the dynamic process of curriculum improvement including assisting teachers in yearly objective updating; developing a system of maintaining lesson plans and thus continuity across teachers; identifying teacher resources

by learning objective; and developing a process for analyzing student mastery of objectives as it relates to curriculum improvement, cross-grade alignment of objectives, and longitudinal analysis of (achievement) test data.

• Research & Development

Perhaps at the base of the resources to which the Education Consultant can offer the district is his/her access to university library research data and literature, outside resource identification and contact, data collection and analysis techniques, assistance in goal and objective definition, and program initiation. This research and development approach, stemming from either an academic and/or experiential base in the social sciences, is critical in maintaining the "generalist approach" of the Rural Education Consultant. The real asset of the Consultant lies both within the breadth of knowledge he/she possesses and in his/her ability to access outside expertise or information.

Not inconsequential among consultant activities is the ability of the consultant to initiate the "School Improvement Process" within the district.

• Personnel Training

Many small districts have great difficulty in providing good in-service programming for their faculty. Affiliation with an Education Consultant can lend itself to made-to-order faculty workshops, teacher sessions on technology usage, individual staff training on areas defined in job targets or mentoring programs, training for board of education members, etc. Rather than just filling time on a designated teacher workshop day with "someone on the circuit", the continued affiliation with an Education Consultant can permit such "knowledge transfer" to occur on a much more frequent and locally relevant basis.

• Professional Development

Often used synonymously with in-service training, professional development can convey more of a sense of self-improvement, teacher empowerment, and understanding of profession pitfalls, (e.g., teacher burn-out, professional abandonment, etc.). The

Education Consultant can assist the administration in structuring a process for faculty input on district goal identification, providing teachers access to professional literature, establishing a mentoring program for new teachers, or developing a process for teacher collaboration, team teaching, departmental decision-making, etc.

• Grant Development

As stated previously, an area in which small schools traditionally suffer is in the competition for outside grant funds. With the assistance of a Consultant--well tuned-in to funding availability, grant providers, and grant-writing skills--the identification of funding sources, concept development, and the actual putting together of a grant proposal becomes a far less forbidding task to the rural administrator.

In addition, a less obvious advantage is the degree to which the Consultant, true to the R & D (research and development) approach, can initiate and work through the "School Improvement Process" while laying all of the groundwork for program--and grant--success.

• Administrative Assistance

While the intracasies of school finance have become mind-boggling, many administrators would welcome assistance in such areas as budget development and analysis, accounting, transportation, attendance reporting, and facilities management. The Consultant may be able to bring technological applications to bear on the needs of the districts, for example, with computer programs for handling attendance, scheduling, grade reporting, etc. or he/she may be able to provide access to outside persons with expertise in a given administrative area.

• Program Evaluation

As alluded to in the explanation of the "School Improvement Process", program evaluation is often an area in which the small school administrator finds neither the time nor knowledge to undertake. An Education Consultant may lend expertise in the procedures of

data collection, analysis, and interpretation essential to any evaluative process.

• Communication

A by-product of continuing Consultant involvement in a district is the extent to which the Consultant may act as a teacher-administrator liaison. This role may be particularly useful when either administrative style or faculty dissension prevents open dialogue between faculty and administrators. Lacking the authority of an administrator and the vested-interest of a faculty person, the Consultant can serve as an objective source of information, ideas, or problem solution to either side.

V. CHARACTERISTICS AND QUALIFICATIONS OF A RURAL EDUCATION CONSULTANT

Because there is no academic discipline which directly prepares one for the role of education consultant, the qualifications for such lie not in the degree status of the person but in the breadth of expertise and experience brought to the job. Indeed the academic background of a person hired as education consultant should contain the following:

1) a broad knowledge in the liberal arts, including the major primary/secondary content areas, e.g., language arts, science, social studies, math, music, and art.
2) a passing familiarity in the peripheral academic areas, e.g., foreign language, home economics, business, etc.
3) knowledge of counseling techniques, child psychology, and social or educational psychology.
4) a strong background in social science research methods

In addition to academic preparation, the education consultant should possess the following characteristics or qualifications:

1) a generalist orientation -- Analogous to a country doctor, an education consultant should be able to "plug into" any number of unrelated problems with the ability to work toward their solution from different vantage points.

2) a background not necessarily in education -- While it is entirely possible for a former teacher to fall into the role of education consultant--especially from areas such as elementary or special education--academic preparation in education is not a necessity. Indeed, such a background may tend to hamper the perspective of the consultant,

thereby limiting the scope of their actions. A non- educator perspective can often bring new light to old problems, causing solutions to be found outside the educational mainstream.

3) a problem-solving orientation -- The way in which administrators and faculty relate to the consultant is dependent upon the consultant's mode of operation. If one's orientation is toward "problem solving", the role of consultant becomes much more dynamic. The advice and assistance of the consultant will be sought out with the emergence of perceived problems rather than waiting until the administrator defines a "task to be done". This is a very different orientation from that to which educators are accustomed. To define the role of consultant as an employee with regular, defined tasks to be accomplished may be the starting point or impetus for initially hiring a consultant, but unless the role is shifted to one of immediate and long-range problem-solving, the role of consultant will be short-lived.

4) knowledge of current education research and program information -- Crucial to the success of the rural education consultant is a broad-based knowledge of current education (and related) research and the ability to apply research findings to local situations. This is an area in which schools can benefit immensely from day-to-day exposure to "the outside world". With the constant infusion (both formal and informal) of research findings, the current literature, and educational program and method innovations to the local school, teachers and administrators can feel that they are knowledgeable about what is going on in the broader educational arena. This level of knowledge in itself is conducive to helping teachers initiate their own solutions, often with a minimum of intervention. It goes without saying that many of what are believed to be the unsolvable problems of rural--and urban--schools stem from the stagnation and complacency accompanying an entrenched educational system.

In addition it is necessary for an education consultant to have a working knowledge of the many state- and national-level programs in education in order to assist small

districts through the often tedious processes involved in application and evaluation. It certainly helps if ones knows Chapter 2 from Title II, but perhaps equally important is the ability to decipher program manuals and regulations, allowing the administrator to "cut straight to the chase scene."

5) access to university and/or college departments -- The linkages possible between primary/secondary and higher education institutions have barely been tapped. Local districts can benefit immensely from such relationships not only as a source of teacher in-service programming, but also in terms of access to specific information, library research, and in collaborative program partnerships. Public schools are typically isolated from higher education institutions not only geographically, but institutionally. The education consultant can serve as the bridge between the two. If the access to a college or university is evident to faculty and administrators, there is much more of a feeling of collegiality on the part of the teaching faculty and thereby an enhanced opinion of their standing as professional educators. This is an added bonus in an age of decreasing professional esteem .

The opportunity to link students with the broad resource base of universities or colleges is also significant. Through telecommunications, students in a small rural school can have access to university library holdings, tap into ongoing research programs, or do the literature search required for a two-page paper or a semester-long research project.

6) Knowledge of research methodologies -- Part of the problem-solving orientation requires that one first understand the issues involved, the current status of the situation, the range of possible solutions, and the attitudes and differing needs of those involved. While the typical methods employed in education rely heavily on a mixture of conventional wisdom and selective perception, the education consultant can bring an element of impartial empiricism to the situation by utilizing needs assessment and other research methodologies. In addition, a rigorous periodic evaluation of programs or

efforts provides a reliable information base from which programs can be retained, modified, or eliminated without reliance on incomplete information or retention of same personnel.

This research focus should be applied to student information as well, so that long-range planning can utilize the longitudinal analysis of achievement test data, dropout rates, post-secondary plans of graduates, etc.

7) Knowledge of educational technology -- What was the advantage of interstate highways for linking country to city is now the advantage of educational technology to the rural school. Beginning with computers and continuing through the many applications of telecommunications and distance learning, schools today are not generally equipped to match strides with the business world in the utilization of technology. Even the utilization of computers as an instructional tool is not an obvious or easy transition for many educators. Considerable assistance is often needed in order to bring the use of computers beyond the "put-one-in-the-back-of- the-room-and-use-it-a-student-reward" stage. An education consultant can be most beneficial in helping to identify the needs for which there may be a technological solution, structure the use of that technology in the school, and train teachers in the application of the technology to the classroom.

As isolated schools increasingly become aware of the opportunities of distance learning, e.g., audiographic, instruction by satellite, or interactive two-way video, the problems associated with implementation of the technologies are mind-boggling. Without someone who is technologically literate, schools must rely on private vendors or brokers to tell them what equipment they need, who should install it, and how it operates. This blind reliance on the commercial sector does not instill much confidence on the part of the administrator nor does it address the problems of operation or classroom utilization. Access to an education consultant can significantly lessen the burden of small districts in the transition to technologically-enhanced instruction.

8) Written and oral communication skills -- Part of the value of the education consultant to a small district lies in the extent to which the consultant can make the district competitive in the access to outside grant funds. A consultant with the ability to read the funding guidelines and put together a cohesive, well-documented, and practical grant application is most advantageous to a district whose administrators may have neither the time or ability to do so. In addition, given the problem-solving and research orientation of the consultant, he/she may be in the unique position of understanding a problem, seeing how pieces of a solution fit together, and accessing outside funding to make it come about. The potential of a consultant for working individually with teachers as a way of solving a common problem cannot be overlooked. The ability to communicate one-on-one or in a group faculty situation are both critical to the success of the education consultant.

9) General management skills -- The ability to juggle a large number of differing requests for assistance in conjunction with implementation of multiple programs, ongoing evaluation studies, equipment troubleshooting, and technological planning and adoption is necessary. Without the ability to put things in perspective and keep sight of the larger district goals, it is very easy to become overwhelmed with the tediousness and details of the immediate task at hand.

10) Non-authoritative style -- While the traditional roles in education are very well defined, most usually along lines of authority, the role of education consultant can and should fall outside any such authority structure. A consultant is then free to provide ideas --with no strings attached--to faculty or administrators. Especially as it applies to teachers, the consultant's lack of authority serves both to break down the access barrier and promote the collegial problem-solving approach endemic to the model. As an alternative to the principal "requiring" that mastery learning be implemented in all classrooms, for instance, a far better approach might be the education of the faculty in the advantages and techniques of the process, with the consultant providing the

expertise to assist teachers in individual implementation. If improved education is the long-term goal, it is probable that well-placed assistance in adoption of widely proven techniques is preferrable to the administrative directive to "do it".

To facilitate--in other words, to ease the process by which programs are adopted, teachers are educated, and schools are improved--may be the single best descriptor of the education consultant role.

11) A clear focus on educational improvement -- The focus of the education consultant should be to foster an increased awareness of the opportunities for educational improvement among his/her client districts. Quite apart from the role of the specialist consultant who might be hired by a large district to provide one-time faculty in-service training, the role of education consultant as promoted herein does not entail the provision of only a single service nor within a given amount of time. The role of education consultant works best where the process of long-range planning is initiated within a district and the consultant works closely with administrators and faculty in developing responses to existing problems or program initiatives. Again, the impetus for originally hiring a consultant may lie in a single focus area, but the continued affiliation of the consultant with the district relies on the district's recognition of the need for continuing assistance in fostering educational improvement.

The consultant role is atypical of an employer-employee bureaucracy in that specific duties may not be required of the consultant, rather the consultant is given a broader perogative to instigate informed change (of course, always with the knowledge and involvement of the administration). Care should be taken on the part of the consultant, however, in avoiding establishment of his/her own agenda for the district. The role must be seen primarily as a facilitator whose responsibility is for district-level research and development. Any initiatives pursued must have both passed the test of applicability to the local situation and administrator approval.

VI. ADVANTAGES OF THE RURAL EDUCATION CONSULTANT MODEL

Why should a district consider hiring an education consultant? What is to be gained? Among the advantages to a district hiring an education consultant are:

1) Lacking administrative authority, the consultant is more likely to be seen by the faculty as non-threatening and supportive. The consultant can be the mentor or colleague for which the teacher had always wished. At a district level, this can result in an increasingly professionally knowledgeable faculty.
2) Because of the unique intermediary role of the consultant, change can be facilitated at both an individual teacher level as well as at the district or programmatic level. The level at which the consultant operates can vary according to the immediate needs of the district.
3) A part-time rural education consultant provides a cost effective means of acquiring outside expertise. Rural districts, both because of financial constraints and access, cannot hope to bring into the district a different specialist for each purpose. With the generalist perspective of the education consultant, what is lacking in immediate expertise can be acquired through the information network of which they are a part.
4) The institution of the role of rural education consultant effectively reduces the demands placed on rural administrators. It is a way in which rural administrators can feel that the need for educational improvement is being addressed, while not increasing the demands on their own time and abilities.
5) The new or different perspective brought by an outside education consultant can effectively inspire positive change within a system. Educators talking to educators, especially in the confines of a small, isolated school, is not usually the most conducive situation for coming up with new solutions to old problems. With the infusion of new ideas or perspectives, the momentum for addressing problems or opportunities may be significantly increased.

6) Employing a consultant with grant writing skills allows a rural district to better compete for outside funding. Often the lack of time, little related academic preparation, and limited experience conspire to leave the rural administrator unable to compete in the world of competitive grants. With the writing burden removed from administrators, they are then free to provide the leadership to instigate or develop program initiatives, while the consultant assists in obtaining outside grant funds and implementing programs.

7) With the focus on long-range planning and educational improvement, the education consultant can help the district more appropriately direct their limited resources. Assistance in establishing educational priorities based on careful evaluation of district needs should result in a more efficient process for implementing change.

VII. IDENTIFYING THE RURAL EDUCATION CONSULTANT

Because the role of rural education consultant is relatively new and not currently a professional aspiration among either higher education graduates or established educators, a district cannot look in the yellow pages for someone to hire. Alternatively, however, there are ways in which a district or group of districts could potentially access a person who would have the combination of experience and expertise needed:

1) Contacting placement offices or deans' offices within university departments of education should result in an increased alertness for persons possessing the characteristics of a rural education consultant.
2) Advertising for such a position opening in education journals, regional newspapers, technology newsletters and journals, or electronic bulletin boards, not only would increase the awareness of persons to the need for this role, but also attract the person wishing to change (or begin) employment in a wide-open field.
3) Not to be overlooked is the possibility of attracting a classroom teacher (preferrably from another district) to serve in the capacity of education consultant. While not sufficient in itself, experience as a classroom teacher--especially in more general knowledge areas, e.g., special education, media production, etc.--can form the base from which one could emerge in the role of education consultant.
4) Until the role is more widely established, a district in attempting to hire an educational consultant must usually look for the educational entrepreneur. In this category may fall those highly motivated former teachers who have become disenchanted with the classroom or those technology-inclined persons who see the opportunity to create a professional niche for themselves.

Regardless of the methods used in trying to locate a person to serve in the role of education consultant, the primary consideration to the district should be the capabilities, enthusiasm, and expertise of the person hired as opposed to their academic background in education.

Finding persons qualified to undertake the job of rural education consultant will be difficult until such time as the role is more widely recognized in educational circles and in institutions of higher education. As the emergence of the profession continues, however, a support network will undoubtedly also emerge, lending further access to information among those acting in the role of education consultant.

In order for wide-spread adoption of the model to occur, the issue of salary must also be dealt with. It is impractical to assume that a salary level consistent with other existing consultant activities can be initiated or maintained in those districts in most need of such services. If the salary is attractive enough to draw excellent teachers and administrators, the cost will be prohibitive to rural school districts. Alternatively, part-time consultants will have to find multiple districts to serve in order to approximate a full-time salary. Serving more than one district simultaneously does have some inherent problems, but is an acceptable arrangement providing the issues of time allocation both in and outside the district are manageable.

VIII. DISTRICT CHARACTERISTICS CONDUCIVE TO MAXIMIZING USAGE OF AN RURAL EDUCATION CONSULTANT

In order to take advantage of the services of a rural school consultant, several district characteristics are considered essential. Other attributes enable the district to maximize usage of the consultant services.

Prerequisite District Criteria

1) an identified need--there has to be an impetus for hiring an education consultant;
2) a relatively small district size coupled with an administrative staff who, because of time and/or lack of expertise, cannot adequately deal with all sectors of the educational improvement effort;
3) a district commitment to educational improvement;
4) an open-minded, progressive, and improvement-oriented administration willing to relinquish guardianship of the status quo, i.e., amenable to change;
5) a board of education who is generally supportive of administrative directions;
6) a willingness to attempt non-traditional solutions to problems;
7) an educational philosophy which believes that all students can learn if given the proper assistance and adequate opportunity;
8) sufficient financial base to allow the expenditure of funds for other than direct instructional purposes, i.e., to hire an education consultant.

Enabling Criteria

1) non-authoritarian administrative style, i.e., a concensus-building administration;
2) faculty whose interest in instructional improvement extends beyond administrative mandate;

3) faculty willingness to try new or innovative ideas;

4) extensive community involvement in and support of the school;

5) board of education who is supportive of local efforts toward educational improvement beyond the traditional scope of the school.

IX. RECOMMENDATIONS TO DISTRICTS INITIATING A CONSULTANT RELATIONSHIP

Among those factors which will contribute to a successful relationship between a rural education consultant and a local school are:

1) The district should understand that the goal is not the hiring of an education consultant. That should only be the process by which needs are met and goals attained.
2) It will be difficult for a single district to initially rationalize the expense of hiring a full-time education consultant. School consortiums, clusters or cooperating districts may, however, pool their resources in order to put together a full-time position with a competitive salary.
3) A person new to the role of education consultant should probably limit his/her services to a maximum of two districts. Additional districts can be added as time allows and as is necessary to establish an adequate salary base. From the standpoint of district attraction of an education consultant, it is advisable for the district to lay the groundwork for the joint hiring of a consultant prior to advertising for the position. The ability to offer a full-time position across multiple districts should increase the likelihood of attracting a qualified person to the position.
4) The need for flexible scheduling should be anticipated both within the district and among cooperating districts. In order to achieve continuity in working with individual faculty members, however, a schedule should be established outlining the day(s) of the week on which the consultant will be available.
5) The role filled by educational consultant should not be confused with that of an assistant administrator.
6) The person performing the services of an education consultant should be new to the district. The difficulty in shifting roles within the same district from classroom teacher to consultant cannot usually be overcome.

7) There needs to be a district process by which the consultant is evaluated both in terms of the nature of services provided and the degree to which the services are carried out.

8) The district(s) must realize the ease with which a consultant can become overextended especially in the context of working with several districts simultaneously.

9) A district, in hiring the services of a part-time education consultant, will usually contract on the basis of number of days per week in the district. Both the district and the consultant must realize, however, that all work required cannot occur in the context of 1-2 days in-district. While on-site time is typically spent in teacher consultation, administrative meetings, tracking of information, equipment troubleshooting, agenda setting, etc., a substantial amount of off-site time will be required for generation of materials, development of assessment instruments and grant proposals, follow-up on faculty requests, library research, and out-of-district contacts.

10) The local district and rural education consultant must actively avoid program adoption without first identifying the needs and reality of the local district.

11) The rural education consultant, while working toward a goal of educational improvement, must realize and abide by the constraints imposed by local administrative and teacher philosophy.

12) Decision making power must not be transferred from the rural administrator to the education consultant, regardless of the administrator's degree of confidence with the consultant.

13) Consultant agenda-setting should be the result of careful evaluative and comprehensive planning efforts in which all operatives--board of education, administrators, teachers, students, and consultant--are included.

X. PROMOTING ADOPTION OF THE RURAL EDUCATIONAL CONSULTANT MODEL

Most small school districts today have never considered the possibility of hiring an outside person to work with faculty and administrators in educational improvement or other efforts. Several reasons for this oversight are apparent: (1) Most schools have not yet taken seriously the widely promoted movement toward improving education; (2) there has been the tendency within education to isolate the school from "outsiders", leaving educators to educate; (3) schools typically define their purpose as the singular commitment to classroom instruction; (4) most schools typically respond to state-level mandates, rarely initiating programmatic efforts on their own; (5) far too few schools have taken it upon themselves to find their own solutions to their own problems--most rely on the adoption of trickle-down ideas; (6) the traditional school has such well-defined roles--board, superintendent, principals, teachers, students--that the inclusion of a new role does not occur to most administrators; and (7) most state departments of education frown upon an "unnecessarily high" ratio of ancillary staff to students.

Without some external initiative, therefore, most small districts will not know about nor consider the possibility of hiring an education consultant, even though administrators are faced with increasingly complex and numerous obligations. Seemingly an impetus is needed.

The following are suggested as ways in which the model of a rural education consultant can be promoted and therefore more widely adopted:

1) As small districts realize the availability of more and more opportunities to apply for competitive grant funds, the impetus may increase for hiring outside assistance to help in the development of grant-funded programs;

2) Administrators could be made aware of the possibility of hiring an outside education consultant through existing education agencies. This awareness might be promoted through a state department or regional education laboratory-sponsored study to determine how small rural districts are currently meeting--if they are--the increasing demands placed on them;

3) If one or more colleges of education (or other related disciplines) took it upon themselves to offer a multi-disciplinary degree program in educational consulting, the demand would certainly follow. [Of course, it is unlikely that such degree programs or areas of emphasis will exist until the demand is sufficient to warrant it.]

4) Pilot programs, in which schools are assisted in hiring and paying for such consultants, remain as a way in which surrounding districts can see the model in effect. This method is less beneficial for diffusion of the concept, however, than it is for delineating and fine-tuning the process of rural education consulting.

5) As more persons come to identify themselves in the role of rural education consultant, a network through which individual consultants are linked will certainly help in providing a support system across regions or states.

6) The possibility exists for the formation of a consultant internship program associated with a state, regional, or national educational organization or agency. As a non-degree training program offered to persons meeting minimum knowledge and skill criteria, such an internship might serve both to attract persons wishing to initiate a consulting service and to provide them with a placement network upon training completion.

7) Within the domain of a college or university could be the formation of a rural education consulting research program which would link a staff of consultants to academic research programs in the area of education, community development, etc. The purpose here would be twofold: (1) to provide small schools with limited consulting assistance in high demand areas; and (2) to provide college or university researchers with a base for conducting educational research. Such research could then serve as the basis for continued consulting assistance.

XI. CONCLUSION

The addition of a part-time, professional, non-teaching position to the rural school explicitly for the purpose of assisting in the process of educational improvement may on the surface seem to be an unwise expenditure of limited resources. The promise it offers, however, is the ability to confront the crisis in education from a locally relevant vantage point and to design remedies as needs occur, exploit opportunities as they arise, and redirect efforts based on careful evaluation of the local facts.

The relationship between a small school and an Education Consultant can empower a district to solve its own problems, rather than relying on legislated mandates or state agency directives. There are no global answers. Perhaps the biggest problem in education today is the anticipation that someone will find an *answer* to dropping out, violence in schools, declining abilities of graduates, etc. While restructuring efforts are applauded, perhaps our applause needs to be held for those districts wishing to tackle the problems, one at a time, on their own terms, given their own realities. Perhaps then we will begin to see a revitalized educational system capable of meeting the challenges of the 21st century.

The mimicry of the urban educational system cannot continue as the single model for education in this country. It is up to small and rural districts, largely unfettered by size and bureaucracy, to now lead the way. The role of Education Consultant may be the catalyst needed.

END

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